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ABSTRACT

The Experience Corps Program, which was initiated in 1996 in New York's South Bronx, connects retirees with children in elementary schools. The Experience Corps' volunteers, who are mostly lifelong residents of the South Bronx, work a minimum of 15 hours each week throughout the school year as mentors, tutors, and special assistants. Since 1997, Experience Corps volunteers have been enhancing education by serving as mentors to at-risk first graders in four South Bronx schools. In September 1998, 56 children who had been identified as being at risk for reading difficulties were grouped into "matched pairs" that were randomly assigned to one of two cohorts. Between September 1998 and January 1999, Experience Corps volunteers administered 40 tutoring sessions to the children in cohort A but not to those in cohort B. From January through June 1999, the volunteers administered 40 tutoring sessions to the children in cohort A but not to those in cohort B. When the children completed the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) in January 1999, the children in cohort A scored significantly higher than did those in cohort B. When the PALS was readministered in June 1999, there were no significant differences between the scores of the children in the two cohorts. (Contains 7 charts.) (MN)

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Community Service Society of New York

No. 18 June 2000

The Experience Corps: An Intergenerational Program Flourishes in the South Bronx

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Study Shows Senior Volunteers Promote Reading Improvement

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of older adults. There are twice as many older Americans today than there were 30 years ago, and this number will double again over the next three decades. At this time when the number of older adults is growing so rapidly, the Community Service Society's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program has an initiative that engages senior volunteers in valuable work.

The Experience Corps Program, which was initiated in 1996 in the South Bronx, connects neighborhood retirees with children in elementary schools. This connection serves two powerfully important purposes. It engages older people in work that can make a real difference, tapping into their extraordinary repository of knowledge and experience. At the same time, it makes an impact on the lives of children growing up in bleak, low-income neighborhoods and attending schools that are seriously overcrowded and underfunded.

The Experience Corps volunteers are mostly lifelong residents of the South Bronx. They work a minimum of 15 hours per week throughout the school year in various capacities, including as mentors, tutors, and special assistants. Since 1997, the majority of the Experience Corps volunteers have been enhancing literacy by

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serving as mentors to at-risk first graders in four schools in the South Bronx. They use the Book Buddies Program, an innovative one-on-one tutoring approach created by Professor Marcia Invernizzi at the University of Virginia. In the Book Buddies model, volunteers engage children in 45-minute structured tutoring sessions in which they practice reading and work on phonics word study. Each child's session is designed to meet her unique needs as her reading develops.

A Fruitful Marriage: The Experience Corps and The University of Virginia

The Book Buddies Program has been successfully employed in Virginia schools for almost ten years. The first year that it was implemented in the high-poverty, densely-populated urban setting of the South Bronx also brought excellent results. At the beginning of the 1998-1999 school year, the Experience Corps participated in an empirical study to prove the effectiveness of the volunteers using the Book Buddies Program. The study was carried out at one of the Experience Corps sites, P.S. 27, a school under redesign due to its consistently low standardized test scores.

An Innovative Research Design

In September 1998, 56 children, who had been identified by their teachers as at-risk for reading difficulties, were tested with the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) assessment. This assessment measures children's knowledge of alphabet letters and sounds, ability to associate letters with sounds in a spelling task, and ability to identify words in isolation. Each child's total PALS score was calculated. Based on this score, "matched" pairs of children were created. Each of the matched pairs scored within six points of each other. Members of the matched pairs were randomly assigned to Cohort A or Cohort B. Volunteers administered 40 tutoring sessions to the children in Cohort A between September 1998 and January 1999. During this time the children in Cohort B did not receive any tutoring. In January 1999 the children from both cohorts were tested again using the PALS assessment. Then the volunteers administered 40 tutoring sessions to the children in Cohort B between January and June of 1999. In June, all of the children were tested a final time using the PALS assessment.

The Pre-Test Results

The results of the pre-test, administered in September 1998, illustrated that the children at P.S. 27 needed a great deal of extra support to become readers. Several of the children did not know a single letter of the alphabet or any words in isolation. The majority of the children knew five or less of the letter sounds.

Dramatic Results at Mid-Year

In January 1999 the children were retested with the PALS assessment. It was predicted that the children in Cohort A, whom the volunteers had tutored, would perform significantly better than those in Cohort B, who had not received any tutoring. The results indicated that this prediction was accurate. **The children who received one-on-one tutoring (Cohort A) scored significantly higher than the children who did not receive tutoring (Cohort B).** The difference between the test scores is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Children in Cohort A had a mean total test score of **90.96** out of a possible score of 112, while children in Cohort B had a mean total test score of only **61.08**. Within the PALS assessment, the areas where Cohort A made the greatest gains were in Letter-Sound Awareness and Word Recognition in Isolation. On the Letter-Sound Awareness section, Cohort A had a mean score of **21.04** out of a possible

26, while Cohort B had a mean score of only **9.2**. On the Word Recognition in Isolation section, Cohort A had a mean score of **13.52** out of a possible 20, while Cohort B had a mean score of **6.04**. Charts 1-3 illustrate these striking results.

Chart 1

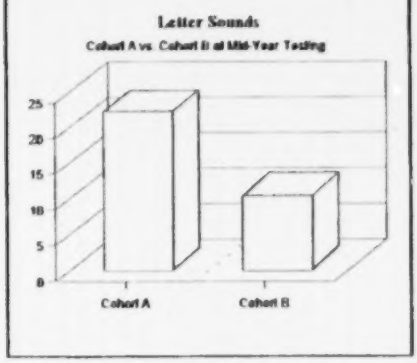


Chart 2

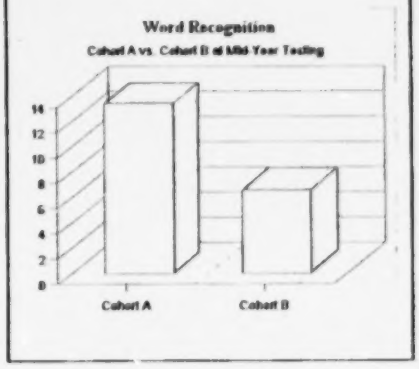
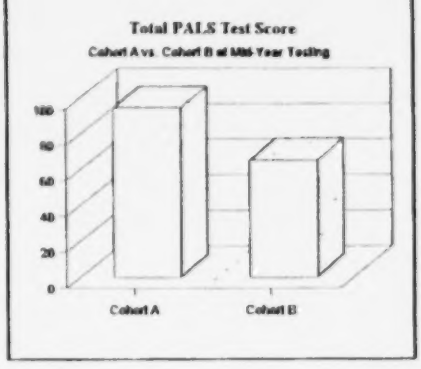


Chart 3



Rounding Out the End of the Year

In January 1999 the children from Cohort B began their 40 tutoring sessions. The volunteers tutored these children during the months of January to June; the children from Cohort A did not receive any tutoring during this time. In June 1999 all of the children were tested again. This time, as expected, there were **no significant differences between the children**.

The results show that the tutoring was effective. Cohort B had caught up with Cohort A and the two groups scored comparably to each other as they had in the fall before any of the tutoring began.

Charts 4-7 show the dramatic rate of progress that the children made while they were in the tutoring sessions. Of course all of the children made increases throughout the school year. However, it is possible to isolate the results of the tutoring alone, because the children's rate of increase grows substantially while they are part of the tutoring.

- Students were assessed three times over the course of the school year, in September, January, and June.
- Cohort A received tutoring between September and January.
- Cohort B received tutoring between January and June.
- All children improved throughout the year. The graphs illustrate the *rate of increase each group made between the months of September and January, and January and June.*
- Cohort A showed the greatest amount of increase between September and January (during the months that they were tutored).
- Cohort B showed the greatest amount of increase between January and June (during the months that they were tutored).

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Chart 4

Letter Sounds

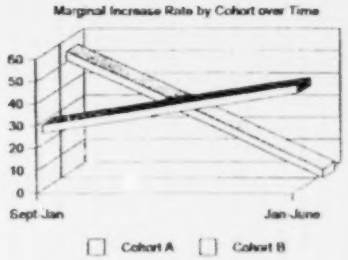


Chart 5

Letter Identification

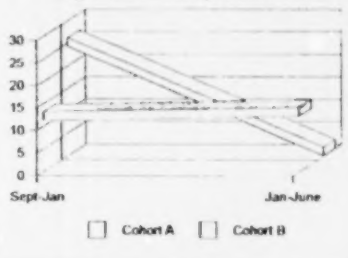


Chart 6

Spelling for Sounds

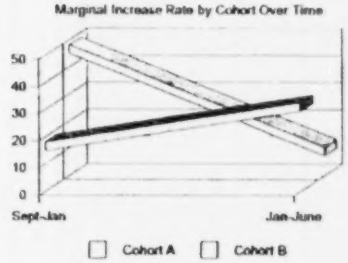
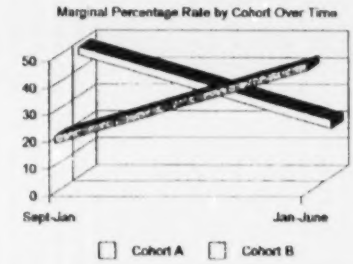


Chart 7

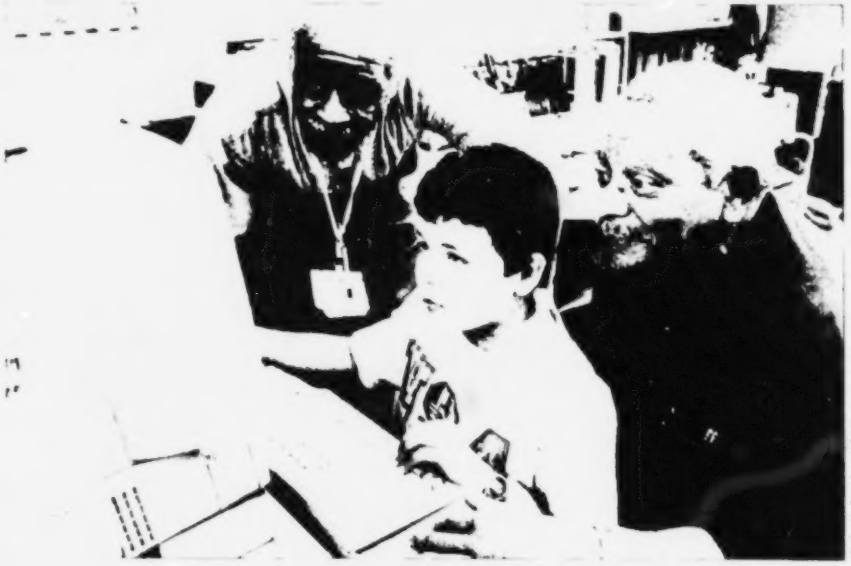
Word Recognition



Conclusions

The study offers dramatic proof of the value of Experience Corps volunteers in the lives of the children in the South Bronx. In this area of the country, the poorest Congressional District in the United States, the volunteers ensure that these at-risk children get individual one-on-one attention and the tools they need to learn how to read.

This program, with a proven record of effectiveness, would be an excellent value for the Board of Education to fund. It utilizes a largely untapped resource, local residents age 55 and older. The contribution that the volunteers make amounts to the equivalent of between seven and eight full-time staff, making it an extremely cost-effective solution to understaffing in the schools. It would be in the best interest of the city schools to capitalize on the extraordinary knowledge and talent that the volunteers have to offer.



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